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# REPORT ON THE "SAFE SPACE PROGRAMME" IN I-SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN

This project is implemented with the support of Restart Foundation in cooperation with the Ukrainian NGO, Words Help, and the Centre for Mental Health at NaUKMA



# DISCLAIMER

This report was prepared as part of the implementation of the psychosocial support programme for preschool children "Safe Space", which was implemented at the **I-School kindergarten**.

The initiative was implemented with the support of **the Restart Foundation** in partnership with **the non-governmental organisation "Words Help"** and **the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre**.

The report presents the key results of the programme's implementation at the **I-School kindergarten in Kyiv from September to December 2025**. The document covers the experiences of all parties involved in the programme: parents, teachers, the administration of the institution, and specialists who directly implemented the classes. They talk about how participation in the programme affected the children – it helped them better understand and express their emotions, reduced their anxiety levels, and taught them to regulate complex feelings, particularly aggression. At the same time, adults – both parents and teachers – gained important experience in emotional interaction and support.

Special emphasis is placed on the professional growth of the trainees who participated in the programme: they had the opportunity to undergo practical training and acquire new tools for working with children in stressful and traumatic situations.

The report was prepared by the project team: **Oksana Zaleska** (supervisor), **Alla Yansons** (CEO of Restart Foundation), and **Olena Tkachenko** (project mentor).



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# INTRODUCTION

Each of our reports begins with a description of the context in which the Safe Space programme was implemented. Each time, we remind readers of the difficult conditions of wartime, in which Ukrainians are trying to maintain the natural rhythms of their lives — going to work, raising children, studying, playing, enjoying themselves, and loving. At the same time, they must be able to quickly run to shelter, get used to a lack of sleep, and overcome their fear during daily heavy shelling. Constant readiness and vigilance for danger. This is the backdrop against which adults live, trying to create conditions so that the children growing up around them feel less of its impact. Of course, this is a misconception; children feel and see the war with their own eyes and are also alert to danger, but they often adapt to their parents' beliefs and hide their anxieties behind bad behaviour, psychosomatic manifestations, or alienation.

During the project's implementation, several hits occurred on residential buildings near the kindergarten. On the night of 29 November 2025, a residential building in the Dnipro district of Kyiv was struck, causing a fire and damage to the 6th and 7th floors. The fire was contained; according to official information, two people were injured and seven rescued, including one child. On the night of 27 December 2025, debris damaged three high-rise buildings in the Dnipro district: a fire broke out on the 3rd and 4th floors of an 18-storey building (it was reported that a person may have been trapped under the rubble on the 5th floor), debris also hit a 25-storey building (fire on the 1st and 2nd floors), and the roof of a 19-storey building was damaged; there were also separate reports of a hit on a depot. In total, 32 casualties were reported across the city at that time<sup>1</sup>.

Photo credit: Suspilne Media, "Photos of the aftermath of the attack on Kyiv," available at: [Photo credit: Army Inform and Kyiv City Military Administration, published by The Kyiv Independent](#)



This has a significant impact on adults and children. We saw signs of stress reactions directly in the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> Enemy attack on the capital at night on 27 December. ([Official portal of the Kyiv City State Administration — Home](#))

# INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Safe Space programme, developed by the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre, is a comprehensive psychosocial initiative aimed at increasing children's stress resistance, supporting their emotional health, and developing self-regulation skills in wartime conditions. Between **September 2025 and December 2025**, the programme was implemented at the I-School kindergarten in Kyiv in partnership with the Restart Foundation and the NGO Words Help. The programme was adapted to the kindergarten's needs. At the initial meetings, the kindergarten's founders emphasised that it operates according to the innovative Intellect programmes and prepares children for serious intellectual challenges. However, the teachers and psychologists at the facility often encounter difficulties in regulating children's behaviour, maintaining classroom discipline, and addressing frequent refusals to complete tasks and resistance to learning. The institution's administration also reported staff exhaustion and the need for resource support. Therefore, the administration made a clear request to work with the staff, so we immediately incorporated this into our project implementation planning. At the same time, after presenting the project, its philosophy, and the specifics of its implementation, which involve the staff in significant organisational and psychological changes, we encountered resistance from teachers and uncertainty about the possibility of implementing the project in the kindergarten. The institution had a clear structure and a culture of communication with children, which, in most cases, followed an authoritarian style. Implementing Safe Space in the kindergarten was a challenge for both the institution's specialists. However, the difficult work turned into fruitful and productive cooperation. At the end of the project, we are pleased with the results and have high hopes that the changes in the kindergarten will enable us to build a truly safe space for children to grow and for teachers and psychologists to realise their professional potential.

## **A team of four specialists was involved in the implementation of the programme:**

- supervisor — Oksana Zaleska;
- mentor — Olena Tkachenko;
- 2 interns — Hanna Tkachenko, Oleksandra Melnyk

## **The programme covered participants, including:**

- 23 children, including 8 girls and 15 boys
- 4 educators
- 40 parents
- 1 kindergarten director
- 1 kindergarten methodologist
- 2 interns.

Both interns were psychologists. One of the interns is a psychologist at the institution, the other is a master's student in psychology. One of the interns needed individual psychological support and was referred for psychotherapy at the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre at the very beginning of the project.



# PREPARATORY STAGE

## WORKING WITH TEACHERS

Between 1 October and 3 December 2025, mentor Olena Tkachenko held 10 supervisory and support meetings with the educators at the I-School kindergarten (each lasting approximately 1 hour). The core group consisted of four teachers and a psychologist, with the head/methodologist, other specialists, and interns joining in on separate meetings. The average attendance for the cycle was 5–6 participants per meeting, ranging from 4 to 9. Support was structured in two interrelated areas:

1. **Professional block** (working with children and parents): the Safe Space programme, recognising stress in children and regressive behaviour, the role of play (both as a tool for development and as a means of group regulation), adaptation to kindergarten, basic ideas of attachment theory as a basis for building contact with pupils, as well as understanding anxiety, contact and safety.
2. **Prevention of burnout and restoration of team resources**: gentle "containment" of emotions, return to support systems and self-regulation, normalisation of exhaustion in the context of war, support for teamwork, and restoration of trust. Pace was very important here: at the start, the topic of "self-care" often brought up tears and helplessness, so we agreed to move gradually — through experience, images, games, joint viewing, and discussion.

Within these areas, we looked at several topics, which we will briefly present here. **At the first meeting**, which was introductory, Olena presented the programme's logic and the stages of the "Safe Space," outlined how the materials could be used in working with children, and explained how to talk to parents. At this stage, it was already clear that the team was working under significant stress and loss, so it was important not to "add another requirement" but to offer a supportive format. As a gentle start, the group did an exercise on resources ("tree/supports") and agreed to return to it throughout the cycle.

**The second meeting** continued the theme of prolonged stress in adults: the educators expressed the opinion that "during wartime, caring for oneself seems inappropriate," while at the same time experiencing difficult life circumstances (losses, anxiety for loved ones). At this time, an important framework was agreed upon: we would move forward in small steps, with respect for the real situation, and select formats that could be accommodated without overload. As a bridge, we chose to watch a film together, which provided material for both professional and emotional reflection.

**The third meeting** was devoted to discussing the film about Maria Montessori, "Educating with Love." Throughout the plot, the team discussed professional paths, the cost of becoming, support among women/colleagues, and how human acceptance and "non-judgement" often serve as the basis for development. The conversation yielded very practical conclusions (for example, about the role of music in a group) and touched on the important topic of inclusion — how to notice signs that a child needs different support and what to do about it within the kindergarten. At the end of the meeting, it was agreed that the next viewing would serve as professional reinforcement for the educator.

By **the fourth meeting**, we were able to talk more deeply about professional issues — signs of stress in children and regressive behaviour. We discussed how regression "speaks" about the need for security and how not to reduce everything to "bad behaviour." We used the programme materials as a tool to explain to parents. At the same time, it became apparent that some team members found it difficult to sustain the stress topic for extended periods. Phrases such as "we are all exhausted, these are difficult times" were heard, and this was an important marker: information should be given in doses and based on specific cases and real situations in the group. After professional support **at the fifth meeting**, we returned to a resource with a hidden goal: to show educators the value of play for children and their development. We played board/team games and watched ...

closely as play brought back liveliness, spontaneity, and contact. It was clear that games for adults can be more than just "entertainment"; they can be a way to restore inner space, where energy and mutual support appear.

**At the sixth meeting**, we continued the topic of play in the context of children. Educators asked, "What to do when children don't listen?" In response, we discussed how play tools help regulate the group (attention, rhythm, cohesion, calming physical elements) without destroying contact. At this stage, there was already a noticeable improvement in trust: more curiosity and a willingness to try.

**At the seventh meeting**, the topic of attachment was introduced through the viewing and discussion of Robinson's documentary film *John*, about a child's reaction to sudden and prolonged separation from his mother and father. The viewing evoked a strong emotional response and became a turning point in the topic of adaptation: educators began to see their role in a new light, as socialisation specialists who can either support or unintentionally exacerbate the trauma of the experience. After the meeting, one educator requested individual support, a sign of growing trust and a sense of security in the space. **At the eighth meeting**, we delved into the topic of attachment. This was a new and very "live" topic for the team: on the one hand, there was a lot of interest and questions, and on the other, sensitivity, because it touched on their own stories of support, loss, and family. The group did an exercise to identify sources of support and discussed the important point that support can be found not only in the family but also in other areas (relationships, colleagues, meaning, stable rituals, professional roles).

**At the ninth meeting**, the topic of adaptation was thoroughly explored: first contact, preparing the space, working with anxious parents, and the criticism of the "let them cry it out" approach. Specific tools were introduced: an initial questionnaire for the family and an adaptation chart/observation criteria to see the child's dynamics and coordinate the team's actions. It is important that, in this topic, educators feel a "long-term result" – something that can be realistically implemented in daily practice. **The final tenth meeting** marked the end of the cycle: reflection, metaphorical cards, the "circle of trust" exercise, and a "fair" as a unifying ritual in which group participants exchanged symbolic gifts. Despite initial wariness, the format proved very warm and symbolically rich.

Thus, the support cycle provided the educators' team with a space where professional training was combined with genuine care for people's well-being. At the beginning, restraint and exhaustion prevailed, and the topic of resources was often perceived as "untimely." Gradually, through soft formats (games, films, metaphors, discussions), trust, curiosity, and willingness to try emerged. In terms of professional position, the most noticeable shift occurred in the topic of adaptation: the team now sees more clearly the importance of first contact, supportive family accompaniment, and the harm of the "let them cry it out" approach. At the same time, specific tools (questionnaires, adaptation cards) and a more coordinated approach to parent interaction have emerged. Strengthening team interaction has become a distinct value: completing the cycle has cemented a sense of closeness, acceptance, and mutual support – an important factor in preventing burnout under long-term stress. In their feedback, educators note above all the changes in their relationships with children:

*"First of all, the classes showed me how to correct children's behaviour in certain situations and get rid of anxiety. We began devoting more time to play activities, combining them with learning and using exercises from Safe Space. The children became more open, sincere, friendly, and adapted to further learning."*

*"According to my observations, the Safe Space group sessions helped strengthen the trusting relationship between the children and me. The children became more open, their desire to spend time together increased, the number of conflicts decreased, and their interactions became calmer and warmer."*

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

At the beginning of the interaction, parents were understandably wary, reluctant to get involved in the process, afraid to talk about the war, tired and exhausted from constant shelling and the difficulties caused by power cuts. In their responses about their condition, parents note a wide range of reactions to the war — from outward calm to pronounced anxiety and exhaustion. Some describe a "calm" reaction or attentiveness without panic, but even there, it is often said that the shelling "knocks them out of rhythm" due to lack of sleep, disruption of plans, and daily life. Others directly mention anxiety, stress, shock, acute stress reaction, fear (especially for their children), and uncertainty about the future. There are signs of hypervigilance (waiting for shelling/checking safety before bed) and sleep disturbances. Physical reactions to shelling and background irritation throughout the day are also noticeable. At the behavioural level, adaptation through control and organisation dominates: parents develop "algorithms" (gathering belongings, going to shelters, setting up mattresses, flashlights, earplugs) and quickly move to a safe place. A very prominent theme is "holding on for the sake of the child": parents try to maintain outward calm, not discuss the war in front of the child, and not let their state of mind show. Sports, psychological distancing/abstraction, and co-regulation are methods of self-regulation; for example, asking the child to look into their eyes to "convey calm." At the same time, there are signs of chronic exhaustion: "I'm tired of this."

Parents' answers to children's questions reveal several leading themes in children's questions and concerns. Most often, children try to understand the reasons and meaning of events: they ask why the war started, why rockets and "shahids" are flying at us, why there are enemies, and why people do bad things. In this search for logic, there is sometimes a painful personalisation of the threat — questions such as "What did I do that they want to kill me?" reflect children's need to find a reason, and, unfortunately, this is also how they try to understand the dangerous reality. A separate block of questions concerns the theme of death and the limits of danger: children ask, "Do people die from shelling?" They touch on thoughts about their own death, "Will I die?" and the death of their parents, as if "checking" with words what frightens them and remains difficult to imagine.

At the same time, many questions are directed towards the future as a point of reference: "When will the war end?" is repeated as a request for predictability and completion. For some children, the key experience is not so much the war itself as the security of communication with loved ones — in particular, the fear of separation from their mother. Parents also notice anxiety related to relationships within the family (tension with an older brother) and among peers (older children refusing to play, anxiety about being a "baby"). At the same time, for a significant number of children, everyday topics come to the fore — routine, kindergarten, boundaries and prohibitions, and everyday issues that parents can most easily handle and explain. This shows that even against the backdrop of war, for many children, "normal life" and relationships remain the central focus of their experiences and an important stabilising support.

As part of the work with parents, a series of meetings (3 joint meetings and 10 feedback meetings with families) was held in a mixed format (offline meeting in the kindergarten and online): an introductory presentation of the programme, a training session on children's reactions to stress, a final joint meeting with the children, and a separate feedback meeting for families. The overall goal of the meetings was to familiarise participants with the programme, educate them about the effects of stress, support parents' understanding of their children's processes, and provide final feedback upon programme completion.

The discussion unfolded gradually — from initial wariness and requests for safety/control to greater trust and involvement. At the first meeting (presentation), parents were most concerned about possible conversations with children about the war, as well as about children's adaptation to the new adults (three new psychologists) and their fear of "new people". It is important that, at this stage, a clear framework is provided as a significant resource, including the possibility for a child not to participate, to observe, to refuse exercises, to have time to adapt, as well as the right of the family to terminate participation if it becomes uncomfortable. A separate set of questions concerned the evidence base of the programme and previous experience of its implementation; after discussion, the parents were generally willing to give their consent for their children to participate, meaning that the programme started against a backdrop of moderate anxiety, which was partly contained by the clarity of the rules and the predictability of the process.

The second meeting (training) showed the group dynamics typical of a new format: at the beginning, "distrust," caution, and an incomplete understanding of "how exactly this can help"; then gradual inclusion; and, by the end, active participation from everyone. At the start, parents mostly brought up their children's fragmented behavioural difficulties, but towards the end, a sense of community emerged ("we are not alone"), and the group became more open. Requests about children's "storytelling" were also indicative: one mother noted that her child actively shares impressions and stories (in particular, the story about Mr. Fluffy and the mole), while other parents anxiously asked why their children only respond with "everything is fine." This shifted the focus of the training to the needs of the group – from purely "behavioural problems" to understanding how children process experiences, the limits of questioning, and how to maintain contact without pressuring children. One particular moment that affected the atmosphere was a comment by a father with authoritarian views (about his daughter's "capriciousness" and her ignoring her needs): the group's energy noticeably decreased, and tension and wariness arose, making it more difficult for the facilitator to return the dynamics to their previous course. This is an important marker of the group's "liveliness": the parents not only listened but also reacted emotionally to differences in values in their parenting approaches.

The final meeting took place against a backdrop of external stressors (power outages, anxiety, and shelling the day before, a public holiday, and additional tension surrounding the calendar changes for Christmas), which affected the general state of parents and children. Despite the organisational difficulties, when all the participants gathered, the programme had a clear effect: parents described the format as new and at the same time very valuable, because for the first time they felt like real partners of their children in a joint process, rather than just "spectators" at a celebration. Fathers were present in all subgroups and actively participated, which fostered a positive group atmosphere. The involvement of the institution's psychologist was also a valuable result: she was very nervous at the beginning, but in the middle of the session, she was able to get into the work and noted that she wanted to use a similar approach in the future. Overall, the final meeting was described as having positive dynamics and achieving the planned results, and the presence of teachers in the subgroups enhanced the quality of subsequent feedback.

10 families attended the feedback meeting; based on their participation in the programme, parents received recommendations on supporting their own mental health and their children's psychological well-being.

Summarising the dynamics: the group went from initial anxiety, distrust of the new format, and questions such as "Is this safe for my child?" to greater involvement, a sense of community, and recognition of the value of parental participation in the process. At the same time, different parenting styles and value tensions emerged within the group, which is important diagnostic material for further work (especially where there is a willingness to ignore the child's needs). The practical result was not only an increase in trust in the psychological support provided by the institution, but also concrete decisions: referral of children who need specialised help and a plan for supportive family support (maintaining contact with the parents of referred children, continuing to observe them, recommending home exercises such as "Circle of Trust" and "Pebbles of Good Deeds"). Overall, the description shows that regular meetings with parents can be an effective tool for education, anxiety containment, experience normalisation, and early identification of children with special needs.

According to a survey of 10 parents (9 mothers, 1 father), feedback on the Safe Space programme is overwhelmingly positive. Parents emphasise the supportive atmosphere and professionalism of the facilitators, appreciate the practicality and age-appropriateness of the exercises, as well as the format itself, which allows them to "look into their child's inner world." The responses repeatedly emphasise safe, warm contact and "tools" that can be transferred to home life: "A very warm and cohesive atmosphere... the exercises are simple but effective," "Useful tools have been put to work," "... the classes provide an understanding of how to deal with children when they display certain emotions." The vast majority of parents are ready to participate again and express a desire for continuity/continuation: "such classes should be regular," "they are needed on an ongoing basis."

Most often, parents describe changes in emotional awareness and self-regulation: *"the child began to talk about their mood, describe what they are feeling," "they began to distinguish and name their emotions themselves... there was a 'breakthrough'"; "they began to breathe deeply when angry."* Separately, we see the "transfer" of techniques into everyday life and the emergence of new family rituals: *"daily cuddles," "calming down with a candle," "asks us to rock him in a blanket," "favourite evening ritual – baking pizza on the back of the sofa."* An important practical conclusion for planning the next cycle is the high demand for individualisation: almost all respondents indicated that they would like to receive personal feedback and recommendations regarding their child.



# PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: GROUP WORK WITH CHILDREN

## CLASS DYNAMICS. OBSERVING CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

As part of the Safe Space programme, three children's groups were created at the I-School kindergarten, comprising 23 preschoolers. The programme sessions were held weekly for 11 weeks in a therapeutic group format, which included psychological information for children, play activities, creative exercises, physical activities, and work on emotions through metaphor.

At the beginning of the programme, the parents of the children who agreed to participate completed a questionnaire about the child's general condition, family circumstances, and psychological well-being. A total of 23 children participated in the Safe Space programme. Among them were:

- 15 boys and 8 girls;
- 3 children are internally displaced persons;
- 1 child is a member of a military family; 1 child has been affected by hostilities;
- According to their parents, almost all children have a supportive social circle — except for one child.
- All children have experienced anxiety, shelters, and the sounds of shelling and shahids.

There were 7–8 children in each group. However, they were not always able to attend all classes. Sometimes children were absent due to illness, sometimes shelling prevented them from attending kindergarten. On average, most children attended 8 classes, some attended 7, and some attended 6. Children who attended up to 6 classes were recommended to repeat the programme. Classes were held both after quiet nights and after heavy attacks. This had a significant impact on the children's condition. The beginning was quite difficult for all groups — the children were excited and active and did not calm down immediately.

Three groups followed a common trajectory: from the initial "scanning" of adults, increased mobility and the need for boundaries, to greater composure, rituality and the ability to talk about their state through play/imagery. The external military context directly entered the field of activities: after nights of heavy shelling, the children came either overexcited or exhausted, and then it was the structure (exercise, creativity to music, "candle", closing rituals) that performed a stabilising function. The regulators that worked best in all groups were sensory–physical elements and repetition: bubbles/exercises, creative tasks accompanied by calm music, "candle" as a transition to silence, as well as closing rituals: "hugs/tickling/high fives," which gave the children a predictable ending and an experience of safe contact.



**Group 1** quickly became "expected": the children arrived with an already recognisable rhythm, gravitated towards the psychologist, easily joined the circle, and gradually moved from denial to greater contact with their feelings. It is telling that when discussing fear, some children initially avoid expressing their feelings in words ("it's never scary," "I'm not afraid of anything at all"), but at the same time, material about fear and control over it already appears in their drawings and fantasies: "this is me killing monsters," "a zombie that I am throwing a sword at," "I will draw a swamp, I am afraid of swamps." In the middle of the cycle, this group clearly shows an integrative process through creative activity: the children calm down to music and can concentrate on sculpting/drawing. The theme of anger provides an opportunity to safely release tension and feel one's own capacity for action. When they are allowed to tear paper and make "snowballs," the children's reaction is immediate and very physical – "Hurray!" – laughter, excitement, synchronised movement. After that, it is easier to return to the rules and completion. At the same time, there was still some unevenness in self-regulation within the group: one of the boys was consistently "overwhelmed," striving to be first and requiring additional boundaries ("always wants to talk, be first"). The family was subsequently referred for individual work with a psychotherapist.

**Group 2** was more impulsive and "physical" from the start: the children often needed tactile contact, had difficulty waiting their turn, and competition and boundary violations became regular challenges for the facilitators. The war background and the exhaustion of adults/children exacerbated the instability: after a difficult night, general "drowsiness/fatigue" was observed, while the children were overexcited and interrupted each other. In this group, the line of digital content as a "language of state" is particularly noticeable: "I'm sad because I couldn't play Roblox," and the stories feature game deaths/victories ("I died in 99 nights") that children bring to the group material. At the same time, in the second group, it is clear how a correctly selected sequence of exercises literally "switches" children into regulation: when they sit down at the table and draw, one boy becomes "calm and attentive" and "waits politely for his turn"; the word "secret" suddenly brings the group to silence and listening. On the topic of fear, some children also begin with denial ("I'm not afraid of anything"), but others give very specific formulations that point to the family context as a trigger: "it's scary when dad argues," "afraid of the dark." At the same time, in their relationships with adults, there is a lot of demand for closeness and reassurance: the child snuggles up, hugs "Fluffy," promises "I'll behave myself," and in the closing ritual, the playful "key" of the group appears in the coded word "super-duper" when the child asks for a tickle toy.

**Group 3** is most sensitive to the style of the adult field and the context of the educator's presence: when there is less authoritarian pressure nearby, the subgroup is noticeably calmer and more creative. In this group, it is clear how children symbolise fear through dreams and images, and also create "protective" objects: masks "from scary dreams", "from dreams about zombies", "from zombies". Along with this, there are very direct markers of everyday stress and traumatic background: one boy comes in and says that "it smells like cigarettes" (about a candle), and before the end of the class, the children begin to anxiously fantasise that without carrots, Fluffy will "die". Adults in the children's field actively discuss blackouts, store closures, and the possibility of food shortages.

In December, family and separation issues become more prominent in the third group – a child directly expresses ambivalence: "When I have to go to my dad, but I want to be with my mum." In response to the tension, the same "supports" work well as in other groups: children make "snowballs" for a long time, get tired, and then are "very happy" when they throw them; after spontaneity and motor imbalance, they can return to drawing and say that they "feel calm." At the final meetings with their parents, the children are more likely to show their learning through action (circle of trust, stones of memories, calendar of pleasant things, candle) than through verbal "narratives" – that is, the experience is integrated through creativity, physical exercises, and rituals.

Thus, in the three groups, the programme functioned as a stabilising container in a changing context: the children gradually moved from chaotic excitement/competition to a greater ability to wait, listen, complete tasks, and symbolise fear and anger in play and creativity. At the same time, common "bottlenecks" for the next cycle are clearly visible: impulsivity and turn-taking (the need for very clear boundaries of the body), sensitivity to the presence/style of adults (educators/parents), and the overload of digital content as the backdrop for children's stories. The most effective stabilisation tools in all groups remain repetition, sensory-bodily practices, "candle" and clear completion, which should be preserved as the "core" of the programme.

# INTERACTION WITH INTERNS

There were two interns at the I-School kindergarten: Anna Tkachenko, the institution's psychologist, and Oleksandra Melnyk, a psychologist and master's student. Both interns gained experience observing classes, assisting during classes with a mentor, and conducting classes independently.

An important part of their training was mentoring discussions, during which the interns learned to analyse group dynamics and children's behaviour and reflect on their actions during classes. The meetings focused on:

- implementing the programme in the kindergarten setting (coordinating schedules, conditions, roles, and administration expectations);
- stress due to lack of time and resources;
- documentation and reporting;
- training in observation (what to record and how, the difference between observation/assisting/conducting a class, how psychological classes differ from pedagogical ones, and providing feedback to teachers).
- the emotional state of the team in conditions of shelling/alarm and exhaustion, support from psychologists;
- Reflection on the behaviour of children and groups: sensory sensitivity, aggression, impulsivity, difficulty concentrating, adaptation to new children, experiences of parental divorce, the influence of "adult" content/online games, and the need for psychoeducation for parents.
- focus on working with parents (training, analysing behaviour as a "language of needs", routines, supporting self-regulation);
- preparation of classes;
- redirecting children and structured feedback for the institution, parents, educators, and the child.

The trainees then continued their training in supervision sessions, for which they prepared difficult questions and brought complex feelings: exhaustion, anxiety, fear, confusion, anger, despair, and a sense of helplessness. During supervision, these feelings were managed and contained, and the supervision group sought solutions and theoretical justifications for the processes that occurred both in the children's groups and in the adult team.

Based on feedback from two interns, the internship is described as a useful and profound experience for both the children and the participants' professional development. At the organisational level, they mention security emergencies and scheduling overloads/overlaps, but emphasise that gradual replanning and administrative support helped keep the process going. When working with children, the value of structure and optimal group size is often mentioned: one of the interns writes directly that she saw "a good effect from the optimal number of children (5-6) in the group" and "the value of observation rather than discipline control." Descriptions of changes in children repeatedly mention increased calmness and engagement: "some began to be more relaxed... focused, began to smile," as well as the group's experience of safety: "these classes are interesting and safe!"



The trainees cited high excitability at the start, competition/conflict among some children, the influence of "adult" content from video games, and stages of resistance to change in the kindergarten ecosystem as difficulties. At the same time, it was these challenges that led to important professional shifts in the interns' thinking: one describes rethinking the role of an adult — "my role... is not to be a controller" — and captures the key idea that "behind bad behaviour... is an unmet need," and in response, the mentor remembered the phrase: "Where can they express themselves if they can't do so anywhere else?" In the development zone, they directly indicate the skills that need to be strengthened: "It was difficult to work with the sequence of exercises... some topics were difficult, such as fear," as well as the need for systemic competencies: "communication skills with the administration, parents, and educators... improving skills in conducting training sessions with parents."

In her final essay, one of the interns writes, "Participating in the Safe Space project was a significant step in my professional and personal development. I gained experience working in a team of psychologists with clear methodological guidelines, regular supervisory support, and respect for professional boundaries. The project helped me to restore my sense of the meaning of psychological work in wartime, to increase my awareness of my own role and responsibility, and to restore my inner resilience as a specialist. I perceive Safe Space not only as an effective support project but also as a living model of ecological interaction between psychologists, educational institutions, and families. Participating in the project has made a significant contribution to my professional life. In my future work as a practising psychologist, I plan to continue implementing the values and concept of Safe Space.

## **REFERRAL TO SPECIALISED PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE**

As a result of participation in the programme, four children were referred for further specialised assistance, as indicators emerged during group sessions that went beyond the programme's short-term support and required more targeted diagnosis and support. In all four cases, observations during the sessions were supplemented by individual conversations with parents, which enabled linking the children's behavioural manifestations to family history, stressors, and developmental conditions. Children with the following were referred:

- pronounced signs of stress combined with a family situation of prolonged separation;
- hyperactivity, difficulty concentrating, and low cognitive engagement; in this case, it was agreed that a consultation with a neuropsychologist was appropriate to clarify the development profile and further recommendations.
- deficit behaviour against the backdrop of difficulties in restoring emotional contact in the family after the father's return from the front, requiring more prolonged family/child support;
- oversaturation with age-inappropriate informational and emotional content and tension in the relationship with the older brother.

Therefore, referral was an expected and logical step to strengthen assistance where there is accumulated stress, complex family circumstances, or signs of a need for specialised support. We hope that families will receive the necessary assistance.

# IMPRESSIONS OF THE PROGRAMME: FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

## PARENTS' IMPRESSIONS

**Feedback from Jamal's mother, Ms Natalia. Requested no photo:**

"I would like to express my sincere gratitude for this extremely warm, profound, and important project 🌟  
For us, as parents, it was very valuable to observe how, during these meetings, our child learned to understand themselves, their emotions, and others' feelings.

We noticed positive changes in our child's behaviour:

- ✔ He became calmer and more attentive to his emotions.
- ✔ He began to talk more often about what he was feeling and to put his emotions into words.
- ✔ He became more confident, open, and willing to share his experiences.
- ✔ he better understands that emotions are normal and can be safely managed.

What was especially valuable was that everything happened through play, creativity, movement, fairy tales, and warm communication. The child looked forward to each meeting and enthusiastically shared what happened in class at home 🍷

We would like to express our gratitude for the joint meeting of children, parents, and teachers — it created a sense of unity, trust, and genuine support. It was very pleasant to be part of such a safe and caring space.

Thank you for your sensitivity, professionalism, and the love you put into the children. This experience will definitely stay with us for a long time 🌟!"



### **FEEDBACK FROM VICTORIA FISONOVA, SOFIA'S MOTHER.**

The Safe Space project was a valuable experience for us. My child (5 years old) found it interesting and comfortable: she enjoyed attending classes, doing exercises, and learning to recognise and name her emotions. I really liked the warm interaction with the psychologists. I would like to separately mention the psychologist's meetings with parents and the joint value-based meeting in the "child-parent-psychologist" format — it was profound and useful for the whole family. Thank you for your care, support, and safe atmosphere.

## IMPRESSIONS OF THE INTERNS



### **YANA KEMENYASH, TEACHER AT THE FACILITY**

Feedback from intern Anna Tkachenko, kindergarten psychologist:

“Against the backdrop of constant exhaustion, heavy workload, and a continuous stream of requests in the fourth year of war in Ukraine, the introduction of the Safe Space project in the kindergarten was extremely powerful support for me as the institution’s psychologist.

I felt real support, the opportunity to experience difficult emotions — both for children and adults — SAFELY. In my opinion, this is a very valuable experience for all participants, because everything was done professionally: a space was created where it is okay to be yourself, to stop, to feel your feelings, to feel that we are alive and not robots. It was a living resource that cared for, supported, and inspired us to continue working in the realities we find ourselves in.

So I sincerely thank you for this opportunity and cooperation!

## IMPRESSIONS OF THE TEACHERS



### **FEEDBACK FROM KINDERGARTEN TEACHER LYUDMILA GAPCHUK**

“I would like to sincerely thank your wonderful project ‘Safe Space’ for your support, professionalism, and sincere care in these difficult times of war.

I work as a teacher in the older group, and this was the first time we participated in a psychological project with the children, and I was deeply impressed. I gained not only new knowledge but also an understanding of how to better support a child, see their strengths, and create conditions for safe development. I would especially like to note the warm atmosphere in the classes, as well as the depth and practical usefulness of the knowledge gained on overcoming stressful situations, controlling emotions, correcting behaviour, adapting to children, and overcoming anxiety...

I am very grateful to psychologist Olena Tkachenko for her professionalism, sincerity, sensitivity, openness to communication, and positive emotions, which she shared with us during the classes. Thank you for your extremely important work. I wish the Safe Space project prosperity and inspiration in this noble cause!

## FEEDBACK FROM THE MANAGEMENT OF THE KINDERGARTEN

The management of the I-School kindergarten, in particular the deputy director Anna Aleksina, was actively involved in the Safe Space project, not only as an organiser but also as a full participant in events for teachers. It was often difficult to organise classes after shelling, prepare materials, and motivate staff, but the process moved forward, and issues were resolved.

### FEEDBACK FROM ANNA ALEKSINA, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF I-SCHOOL (KIDS) KINDERGARTEN:

Participation in the Safe Space programme was an important step for our kindergarten in working with the emotional well-being of children, parents, and teachers. This is not just a project — it is comprehensive, professional support that is very much in line with today's challenges. We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be part of such a meaningful and profound initiative.

Modern Ukrainian realities have taught us to persevere and live in conditions of constant tension. However, children, like adults, accumulate experiences that require a safe and caring environment.

Often, parents, being in a state of chronic fatigue, may not immediately notice changes in their child's emotional state or warning signs in their behaviour. This is where the work of psychologists, who created a space of trust, acceptance, and support for children, became extremely important. Even the youngest participants in the programme, who were not yet able to express their feelings, had the opportunity to experience them alongside specialists who were sensitive to each child. Over time, a warm, genuine connection developed between the children and the psychologists.

Working with parents became an important part of the programme. The meetings gave them the opportunity to look at their children from a different angle, to notice emotions, reactions, and behavioural characteristics that might go unnoticed in everyday life. For many families, being referred to the centre was the first step towards conscious psychological support and the beginning of important inner work.

I would like to express my special gratitude to the project curator, Olena. Her professional guidance, attention to detail, and sincere involvement were a great support to our team. The meetings with the teachers gave them a sense of support, helped them to better understand their own condition, and provided practical recommendations for restoring their resources.

For me, as the deputy director of the I-School kindergarten, Olena's expert vision of individual processes became decisive in making management decisions. The proposed changes were implemented and yielded positive results. We are sincerely grateful for the cooperation, openness, and deep involvement in the life of our kindergarten.



# CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

Thus, during the implementation of the Safe Space programme, changes were observed at the system level: administration, psychological service/trainees, teachers, and children. Of course, the changes were not always rapid or permanent. At the start of implementation, there was significant organisational tension and a need for a clear framework: the administration wanted quick decisions and immediate communication with staff and parents. The Safe Space team identified the necessary conditions for launch and support (methodological materials, start-up algorithm, key communication messages, legal support), which served as the basis for stabilising the process.

**In interaction with the teaching staff**, a culture of excessive control and an education-oriented regime emerged at the beginning: children spent a long time "at their desks", there was no free play, and the style of interaction of some teachers was authoritarian, with direct prohibitions and the use of pressure as a means of influence. This was accompanied by tension among the children and "external obedience" with high internal tension. At the same time, the first resource formats for adults revealed a significant hidden level of exhaustion: the emotional reactions of teachers to simple questions about self-care and their willingness to remain in the process showed that adults need a container no less than children do. Fatigue and exhaustion provoke adults to be controlling, pressuring, and insensitive to the needs of the child.

**The processes in the team of trainees/psychological service** evolved from initial anxiety about rules and behaviour control to greater professional confidence and the ability to maintain the emotional content of the groups. Supervision systematically addressed the difficulties of establishing rules (with an emphasis on children's involvement in their creation and acquisition of agency) and reporting standards. In the acute context of war (after heavy shelling), a separate focus was placed on the recovery and resources of adults, as their condition directly affected the quality of group management. At the same time, systemic barriers were identified in the environment: a lack of materials and equipped premises, and no time allocated for preparation and reporting, which led to overload and even to individual participants refusing to continue working due to the volume of reporting. In other words, it was also difficult for the institution to initiate the changes needed to implement the project.

**The dynamics of group work with children** showed that at the beginning, the most difficult were children with increased mobility and impulsiveness, as well as children who found it difficult to wait their turn or follow the rules in a circle. Additional risk factors included sensory sensitivity, speech difficulties, and overload with "adult" digital content, which affected attention and behaviour patterns. In the middle of the cycle, there was a noticeable increase in the involvement of teachers in the process (including the gradual addition of those who initially refused to perform the exercises), strengthening of team interaction, and expansion of pedagogical understanding of children's states (discussion of attachment, the role of adult support, viewing, and reflection on films). By December, there was noticeable progress in the behaviour and adaptation of individual children: one child directly said that they were "no longer afraid to stay in the nursery," and a teacher noted that another child was "unrecognisable due to a significant improvement in behaviour." Overall, the groups were calmer, and there were no significant disciplinary issues. The final stage of support was marked by the emergence of new formats for the institution (meetings/trainings with parents and teachers), high gratitude from teachers for the support, and the realisation that the project had brought about changes in the internal culture and required a support plan to maintain the results. Below, we provide recommendations for maintaining the results achieved and further changes in the institution.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INSTITUTION

## 1. Organisational framework and resources to support the school's psychological service

- Based on the programme's results, we recommend revising the psychologist's role at the children's institution — from conducting a large number of classes to providing systematic psychological support that encompasses the child, parents, teachers, and the environment as a whole.
- Set aside working hours for lesson preparation, observation, and reporting so that these tasks are not performed "after work" and do not exhaust the psychological service team.
- Provide basic classroom materials and equipment (a psychological office equipped for group and individual sessions with children, parents, and teachers). The office should have sufficient creative materials, special toys and materials, and space for a circle. If necessary, we can provide materials to organise the psychologist's space in accordance with international standards.
- Create an algorithm for launching programmes for children (when adapted to the needs of a specific group): planning psychosocial interventions by the psychological service, approval by the administration, and notification to educators and parents as a mandatory standard for implementing psychosocial support programmes.

## 2. Group environment and daily routine

- Restore and systematically plan free play as a necessary part of the day (not as a "reward" but as a basic mechanism for relaxation and self-regulation), given the documented lack of free play and the accumulated frustration of children.
- Zone the group space: free play zone, quiet zone, creativity zone — as a "physical container" for different states of the child.
- Conduct classes with children in small groups of 6–8 children.
- Preschool classes should be structured as games, with a variety of activities; children should not have to sit at their desks all the time. (Play is the main activity in the preschool age).
- Group psychological classes should start at the age of 4. For children aged 2 to 4, the best format is individual support as needed, along with educators' support in creating a developmental environment in the group. The main tools are free play, active outdoor physical games, interaction with natural materials, and sensory diversity. The main tool for building all classes is play.

## 3. Adult support and pedagogical culture

- Regular resource/reflective (for analysing complex cases) meetings between the psychologist and educators (short but systematic, for example, 1 hour at lunchtime, once a week), as resource formats were found to result in a calmer state and greater involvement of adults.
- At meetings, support the transition from an authoritarian style to participation: from control over "how to do it right" to supporting the process and children's emotional regulation; this is especially important during creative activities and group circles.
- Create systematic methodological support for new educators without teaching experience, mentoring from experienced educators, and supportive meetings with a psychologist.

## 4. Working with parents

- Continue regular meetings/training sessions for parents as a separate part of the programme, as this format has proven to be a new and meaningful experience for the institution and reinforces the transfer of tools to the home.
- Once a year, hold psychoeducational lectures on the age characteristics of children in each group. Parents gain an understanding of their children's age characteristics, which reduces anxiety, increases partnership between the family and the institution, and makes the psychologist a figure of support rather than control.

A separate topic for parents is digital content and video games: discuss age restrictions, the impact on attention/emotions/behaviour, and agree on rules for using gadgets at home.

## 5. Monitoring, supporting, and redirecting children

- Introduce regular observation and early response for children with acute stress reactions, sensory, behavioural, and speech difficulties (recording dynamics, recommendations to parents, and referral to specialists if necessary).
- Support children with increased impulsivity through stable rules, short sequences of tasks, and predictable rituals (start/transition/end) to reduce competition for turn-taking and boundary violations.
- Form groups for children who need support and provide focused psychosocial support, in particular through the Safe Space programme. Children who need more support and do not show significant improvement after group work should be referred to relevant specialists (e.g., a psychotherapist, psychiatrist, neuropsychologist, neurologist, etc.).

## 6. Systematic feedback

- Establish ongoing three-way communication between educators, psychological services, and administration, and additionally organise periodic contact with parents so that changes are not based solely on the enthusiasm of individuals, particularly psychologists, and do not dissipate after the end of intensive support.
- For our part, we are ready to provide supervisory support to the institution's psychologist and to provide feedback on the institution's psychological service's further work.

As a result, the implementation of the Safe Space programme at the institution has demonstrated systemic effects across children, teaching staff, and psychological services. In the context of chronic wartime stress, the classes became a stabilising factor: the children gradually moved from heightened agitation and the need for strict boundaries to a greater ability to wait, interact, complete activities, and express their state metaphorically through play and creativity. At the same time, adults – educators and parents – gained practical tools for co-regulation and a better understanding of children's reactions, while the support formats created space for professional reflection and team resource renewal, which directly enhanced the quality of interaction with children. Along with the positive dynamics, the conditions on which the sustainability of the results depend were clearly defined: organisational framework (time for preparation/observation/reporting, provision of materials and space), maintaining regular support formats for educators, developing systematic work with parents (including the topic of digital content, age characteristics of children and forms of children's reactions to stress), as well as establishing constant feedback between the administration, psychological service and educators. A separate important outcome was the referral of children whose needs go beyond short-term group support to specialised, focused support, which allows for timely reinforcement of assistance and reduces the risks of accumulating difficulties in further learning and development.

